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HISTORICAL THINKING IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Abstract

Efforts to privatize education, eliminate teachers' unions, reduce spending on public education, and quantify student performance have demoralized teachers in the USA, and educators struggle to keep up with the many changes while still effectively teaching and caring for their students. Within these reforms, however, there is support for history education that prepares students to be globally competent citizens. This paper describes an innovative collaboration among teachers and historians and how it led to historical thinking promoted by common core and edTPA policies. In particular, the most marginalized students made powerful connections with the material, illustrating that education for social justice is still possible in these difficult times.

Introduction

Within a demoralizing climate of attacks on teachers and their unions, calls for privatization of education, increased standardized testing, and rising inequality in the U.S., many teachers still strive to help their students to think critically about the world around them. In this paper, I describe a project that brought the cutting-edge arguments of contemporary world historians into classrooms. Our work demonstrated that all youth, even those in lower tracked classes and the poorest schools, are capable of, and eager to, engage in historical thinking about complex questions and debates in history. In other words, despite the numerous pressures outside the schoolhouse, we found ways to teach history in ways that promote social justice and critical thinking about the world around us. In fact, I will argue that some of recent reforms can be used to justify this kind of teaching.

Context: Recent Directions in American Educational Policy-Making

Teacher education professors and prospective teachers in the US are trying to understand, and resist, numerous policies that many believe are deeply troubling and harmful to young people. First, starting with the federal law known as No Child Left Behind of 2001, and continuing with Race to the Top (2009) in the Obama era, there is a drive to quantify and measure the learning and work of students and their teachers. To obtain federal education assistance and win education grants, states have been forced to implement numerous new high stakes tests for students, particularly in literacy and math. Due to such pressures, many primary schools have reduced time spent on subjects such as social studies, physical education, and the arts.

In addition, there is a move to link teacher performance, and therefore whether or not teachers retain their jobs, to how well or poorly their students do on tests. Such "value-added" measures have been shown to be deeply flawed, since students' socioeconomic backgrounds are the largest determinants of performance. Despite this, these performance measures have been imposed on teachers in about 30 states, where teachers now "teach to tests" in fear of losing their jobs (Strauss, 2012).

Imagination, play, and creativity—and a generation of young people—are the losers in this game.

Attacks on teachers and their unions, fuelled in part by misuse of international data such as the PISA tests, have been used to “sell” these troubling reforms to the public. Are these attacks warranted? Is our education so bad? While there are clearly problems in American K-12 education, teachers face tremendous odds in educating youth. For example, racial and socioeconomic segregation is increasing, not decreasing. In a 2013 UNICEF Report, the US was ranked 34th out of 35 developed countries in its levels of child poverty (Fisher, 2013). Recovery from the recent economic crisis has been slow, and income inequality has increased so much that even millionaires have asked Congress to raise their taxes (Eichler, 2011).

Common Core and edTPA: Toward Reasoned Thought?

Attacking teachers, instead of the deeper socioeconomic reasons for poor learning results, will not solve our educational problems. But there is huge money to be made in education and for-profit charter schools, online learning centers, and textbook and curriculum companies like Pearson want to get their hands on that money. By attacking teachers and unions, they prepare the ground for introducing their often untested and poorly implemented ideas into schools.

Among the reforms promoted by state governors is the idea of a “common core”, a set of standards that all states would adopt and use in their schools. Another reform affecting education faculty and teacher candidates is the edTPA, educational teacher performance assessment, developed by professors at Stanford University as a measure of how novice teachers are performing. Two states, New York and Washington, now require passing this test as part of the certification process. Since these initiatives have been linked to new tests and curricula, often created and sold by for-profit corporations, educators and others are justifiably skeptical of these policies. Yet, within these reforms there is support for the kind of teaching I have been advocating as a pedagogical methods professor. Specifically, their emphasis on developing historical thinking skills and building and supporting arguments using evidence align with my efforts to train teachers to teach history as an argument about the past.

Many social studies and history educators argue that covering a broad range of content through dry lectures is not only dull but antidemocratic. Such learning fails to prepare students to be active citizens who can understand past and present issues, weigh the validity of arguments for and against changes, and advocate for policies to improve our lives. To promote active citizenship, social studies students should be asked to “do” history: ask questions about the past, gather and evaluate evidence to answer the questions, and create their own historical narratives or arguments about the past. Through this process, students become critical readers who are attentive to the biases of texts’ authors, their historical contexts, why the author might have viewed events in certain ways, and to whom they were directing their ideas (Epstein, 2012; Lesh, 2011; VanSledright, 2010).

Educators interested in this form of history pedagogy can find support for their efforts in both common core and edTPA. For example, one common core literacy standard for 9-10th grade calls on students to be able to “assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support an author’s claim” (Common Core,

2012). Another standard states that 11th and 12th students should be able to “integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources”. The edTPA asks teachers to plan units that help students “build and support an argument” about history or social studies topics. In short, there is a strong emphasis on students being able to critically evaluate texts, compare and contrast sources, and develop arguments supported by evidence.

I have been frustrated by the resistance of some teachers to adopting this kind of teaching. So, while there are many reasons to be concerned about current reforms and how they are being enacted, common core and edTPA can be viewed as supportive of some of the very ideas some educational progressives have been advocating (see for example, Baker, 2014). Below, I will describe a project involving students, teachers, and historians that led to the kind of innovative teaching and learning implied in the ideas promoted by these reforms.

Dialogues among Historians, Teachers, and Students

In the past few years, I have been part of a team of teacher education faculty, historians, and teachers that worked together to create innovative lessons based in cutting edge arguments about recent global history. We started with the notion that young people can and should learn how historians develop arguments about the past and youth should be invited to join these debates about what has happened and why. To begin the “dialogue” with teachers and students, we interviewed historians of global history. They discussed common misconceptions about their regions of specialty, described key historical claims they had made in their research, and suggested texts and materials that would help middle and high school students learn more about the history they discussed (Turk, Dull, Cohen & Stoll, 2014). Next, education faculty members and teachers used these interviews to build world history units for their students.

We worked with a diverse group of teachers teaching in a wide range of schools, from wealthy public and private schools to very low-performing public schools. Each teacher made modifications to fit their particular settings, but remained committed to using student-centered methods, asking the same questions, and achieving the same learning goals. While students in all schools displayed deep thinking, we found that the students who are often viewed as the most difficult to reach (lower-tracked, poor, special education) raised particularly provocative questions about injustice and inequality.

The results of our project showed that all students, not just the most privileged or advanced, were capable of the analysis and historical thinking emphasized by the common core and edTPA. Our efforts to help young people interpret historians’ arguments was therefore not only worthwhile, but reflected our profound commitment to social justice: all youth, given the right materials and support, are capable of higher-order thinking and analysis.

Young People Learn Historical Arguments

In an urban classroom of immigrant, poor and working class students, lessons about the Soviet Union and why it “lost” the Cold War led to questions about social

class in America today, and how students' own humble kitchens revealed cracks in the American dream. This unit was based on historian Stephen Kotkin's argument that, contrary to common perception in the US, the Soviet Union did not "lose" the Cold War due to military inferiority. In fact, Kotkin says, the USSR competed with the US as relative equals in the military sphere. Where they fell short of capitalism, however, was in the battle for "stuff". Russians wanted designer jeans, perfumes, and other consumer goods widely available to Westerners.

To introduce the sixth grade students to Kotkin's argument, the teachers focused on the differences between American and Soviet kitchens. In contrasting glossy images of 'modern' American kitchens with plainer Soviet kitchens, students could see how Soviet communism failed to provide a variety of appealing products for consumers. But students also criticized the inequality and harmful effects of competition that arise in capitalist society, noting that their family's kitchens looked more like those from Soviet times. In these discussions, the sixth graders built on Kotkin's argument to dig more deeply into the ongoing human problem of inequality and try to understand their position on the margins of a wealthy society.

Another unit on the Cold War, this time focused on Latin America, was taught in a school in one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City. The teacher asked students to "penetrate the surface of the [US] government's own explanations of its actions" (Loewen, 1995, p. 220) by re-writing a newsreel account of Vice President Nixon's visit to Caracas, Venezuela in 1958 (Universal International News). This activity was inspired by a US government document provided by historians Greg Grandin and Alejandro Velasco. Nixon, who went to Venezuela as part of a tour of Latin America, was greeted by protestors who threw stones at his motorcade. While the newsreel declared the attack as a "communist-sparked onslaught" and blamed the "savagery of the mob" for a broken car window, the recently declassified government memo from 1958 noted that, although the crowd was "presumably" led by communists, there was actually "little evidence to support that belief" and it was "obvious" that there were more non-communists than communists among the demonstrators.

With careful instruction in how to recognize the arguments and perspectives of the newsreel and other sources from that time, students re-wrote the newsreel's narrative so as to provide a more accurate version of the events. Their versions were a strong contrast to the highly anti-communist tone of the original audio recording that accompanied the newsreel images. In short, with the guidance of their teacher, students learned to question, and create more valid alternatives to, the government's explanations of its actions. Our experience illustrated that even struggling students could learn to read texts as historians do, that is, to account for the historical context in which they were written, the perspective and position of the authors or creators, and the arguments being made.

History Education in Difficult Times

While I will continue, with my colleagues, to protest unfair attacks on educators and untested, damaging policies pushed by policymakers and corporate profiteers, I must also be practical as a teacher educator and try to find opportunities within the new strictures. One way is to take action such as that which impelled us to work with teachers to create rich units grounded in cutting-edge historical debates.

Another way is to acknowledge that some of the new standards have some merit, and to use them to underpin and support stronger history education. The students who learned about the Soviet Union and Latin America during the Cold War engaged in thinking supported by common core and edTPA. They discussed and evaluated the complex arguments of historians, weighed competing evidence about events and ideas, and made arguments about the past based in evidence. Such activities teach them how to be globally competent citizens who develop a healthy skepticism about the claims of leaders and others in positions of authority.

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